PLEASE NOTE: This transcript has been auto-generated and has not been fully proofed by ISEOF. If you have any questions please reach out to us at info@thegreatsimplification.com.

[00:00:00] **Victoria Sweet:** If we go to the original environmental movements, a lot of the tenets are, we have to keep humans out of it. We have to have these protected areas. But when you talk to indigenous peoples, that's completely different. Humans are a part of the environment. Without humans doing their job, stewarding the lands, stewarding the plants and the animals in a positive way, you're not going to have as thriving of a community.

[00:00:29] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm pleased to be joined by my friend Victoria Sweet, who is the founder of the Ishkode Fund. Today we will explore how indigenous ideas can help address our hardest challenges, and how Victoria enables critical funding to reach indigenous-led groups. Victoria Sweet is an immediate descendant of the White Earth Nation and granddaughter of a native boarding school survivor.

[00:00:57] Through the Ishkode Fund, Victoria works to restore balance between people and the Earth, as well as provide support that will help strengthen the fire of indigenous leadership and innovation that has long sustained native communities. She has worked at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, where she trained state and tribal judges hearing domestic violence and human trafficking cases involving native community members.

[00:01:26] She also worked with the Whitener Group supporting tribal justice systems in Alaska, and as the director of the indigenous communities portfolio of grantees during her time at the NoVo Foundation. In our conversation, Victoria explains that donating to indigenous-led causes is not a matter of charity, but instead an investment and reciprocal relationship from which we all benefit.

[00:01:53] She shares specific examples of how indigenous communities share knowledge that benefits everyone nearby, despite indigenous-led organizations receiving only one quarter of 1% of philanthropic dollars in the United States. Beyond philanthropy, though, Victoria challenges each of us to get to know a local indigenous community and be open to the possibility of learning something new and unexpected.

[00:02:24] With that, please welcome Victoria Sweet.

[00:02:28] Victoria Sweet, great to see you. Welcome to The Great Simplification.

[00:02:33] **Victoria Sweet:** Thanks, Nate.

[00:02:34] **Nate Hagens:** So you are the founder and CEO of the Ishkode Foundation, and you are of direct ancestry with the White Earth Nation, which I believe is Ojibwe. And you've spent most of your career strengthening systems to protect indigenous people, including justice reform, tribal court development, and now community-led philanthropy.

[00:02:57] Maybe you could start by saying what the word Ishkode means and why that was central to your work and your trajectory that brought you here.

[00:03:10] **Victoria Sweet:** Thanks. Yes. Ishkode is actually a word in the Anishinaabe language, and a lot of indigenous languages are not noun-based languages, so they don't translate exactly into English.

[00:03:22] So at the simplest form, Ishkode means fire, but it's more than just fire. It's fire as medicine. It's fire as transformation. It's the fire that exists in every single person when you feel something inside of you, like a spark, an idea, a knowing about something. And in our tradition, a name is so much more than just a name.

[00:03:47] It's an idea that guides sort of the path that your life is meant to walk. So when this fund was originated, it made a lot of sense to me that we needed to name it first because that gave it some direction, some guidance. How can we take a fund that's all about flowing money and turn it into some kind of healing fire, some kind of transformation?

[00:04:09] And then when you have this transformative fire and you look at the world with the fires that are burning down and all of the damage and destruction that has been done, you have unhealthy, harmful fire, and then you have its opposite. And I'd really love to see this fund represent the opposite.

[00:04:26] **Nate Hagens:** So I wanna get to your fund in a moment and the work that you're doing.

[00:04:30] But two pre-questions. What do you think the role of philanthropy is generally in the meta-crisis world and facing all the things that we're facing? And then a subset of that is my understanding is a very tiny percent of philanthropy is directed towards indigenous populations, and you're trying to increase that.

[00:04:53] So maybe you could set the stage for that. Why is this work so important now?

[00:04:59] **Victoria Sweet:** Philanthropy can play a very interesting role. It's donated charitable dollars. So oftentimes you can use philanthropy for things that investments and other types of capital won't do. It can seed fund something where an investor says, "Well, we have to have certain guarantees to back it."

[00:05:20] A philanthropist doesn't have to do that. So it can be a part, an essential part of a capital stack. Philanthropy can go in and buoy up. So for instance, we fund a lot of nonprofits. For me, a nonprofit organization is an organization that fills in gaps. What is the government not doing effectively? What

do the people in the community say, "We need more of this, and we don't think it's going to happen through these other ways.

[00:05:45] We're going to start our own nonprofits." A lot of philanthropic dollars go to those nonprofits as gap fillers for areas that the community recognizes we need more support. And you know, I think a lot of people don't understand the power of what it means to fund indigenous communities. I think there's a lot of misunderstandings.

[00:06:07] I think there's a lot of prejudices. I think there's a lot of people who only see the negative in our communities. And because of that, they think, "Well, we actually have the answers, and then we'll help these native peoples, these indigenous peoples." And they haven't had a chance to actually see the beauty of what these communities have to offer.

[00:06:25] And because of that, they continue to go and fund other things, fund in other ways, and are missing an incredible opportunity, which is a group of people, communities all over the world, who have knowledge that has existed long before the modern structures that we're living in today.

[00:06:42] **Nate Hagens:** What are the statistics in the United States, North America, the world?

[00:06:46] Like, what percent of people, what is the population of what you might label indigenous?

[00:06:52] **Victoria Sweet:** It depends on how you define us. You'll see it anywhere from, like, 3 to 7% of the world's population. So we're a small–

[00:07:00] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah...

[00:07:00] **Victoria Sweet:** bit of the population, yes.

[00:07:02] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. In some wide boundary sense, and this might offend some people, but in some ways we're all indigenous, right, to this earth, and we're captured by this certain economic system and being rushed along by the river that we're part of.

[00:07:20] But a part of us is indigenous, yes?

[00:07:23] **Victoria Sweet:** Yes and no. Yes, every human being is indigenous to the world. And if you go back far enough in every single person's ancestry, you're going to find people who once lived very much in touch with the earth. However, as of right now, the term indigenous has a very specific meaning, and it deals with the communities that lived and were in touch with the people, had their own systems, their own governments, and then some type of colonial force came in and caused havoc and destruction on the community.

[00:07:54] So right now it's a term of art. So when I'm speaking about it, I'm speaking specifically about the modern definition of what it is to be an indigenous person. And I think we do want to be careful to not broaden the definition so much that we forget the peoples that it's meant to respond to. But also, I do want people to remember that at their heart, everyone is indigenous to this planet.

[00:08:15] Yeah.

[00:08:16] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you. That was clarifying. So tell me more about the work. What are you trying to accomplish with the Ishkode Fund and your future work? And what's the big ask? What's the need and what's the opportunity?

[00:08:33] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, as you mentioned, a very small percentage of money goes to indigenous-led work.

[00:08:38] Yet so many of the indigenous communities hold answers to many of the problems we're facing today, to environmental issues, to food security questions, to how do you care for your elders and your children? And I would like to see a change in the amount of money going out. And yes, I already mentioned that we're a small percentage of the earth's population, but I think we're holding much bigger answers than that.

[00:09:04] I would like to see an increase of funding to indigenous communities, not only to repair the things that happened in the past, though I do think that is a part of it, and when people learn the context and they understand why things are the way they are in our communities, I think they would agree that there's some harm to be repaired and fixed.

[00:09:24] But I also genuinely believe that our communities are poised at this moment in time with everything that is happening around us to be major players in the things that are to come and in finding the solutions to the things that we are facing as a world. This is not a romanticization of the past. This is not expecting people to... I'm not trying to say to you we're better or superior in any way, but I do think that there are big missing pieces in the solutions that are being created, and I think we can play an important role.

[00:09:55] So I would absolutely love to see more philanthropic dollars starting to be unlocked and to flow into community, and I would like to see a way of taking these philanthropic dollars, making them more a part of a big capital stack, if you will, and starting to solve some of the issues that we have at this moment in time while money still has the value that it has. Right?

[00:10:20] Because we know that there are changes coming, and see what comes of it, and see if we can exponentially speed up the rate of finding some solutions.

[00:10:30] **Nate Hagens:** So what are some of the solutions that indigenous communities could, if we listened and there was support, help the broader trajectory ahead of us?

[00:10:44] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, we're in the middle of Climate Week right now, so we're talking a lot about climate. I genuinely believe the people who have stewarded the lands understand the lands in a very unique way. I was with a Zuni elder who was talking about a drought that hit their area, and they had this particular watering area, and it dried up.

[00:11:04] And everyone was thinking, "What are we gonna do? How are we gonna deal with our crops?" And he remembered the name, a place name of a location, and the word for water was in that place name. And he said, "You know, we've never had water there before, but our ancestors must have known something."

[00:11:19] They went to dig it up, and there was water, enough water to be able to feed the crops and keep them hydrated and irrigated throughout. And that's just a tiny example. Built in our languages, built in our stories, built in our traditions are stories of times when there have been other types of climate collapses, when there's been other shifting of temperatures, and how did our community survive that?

[00:11:44] But not only that, there are governmental systems, forms that could help us as we are dealing with geopolitical collapse all over the world. There are stories of indigenous midwives and birth workers who are bringing back traditional ways. I mean, we have, especially in the United States, incredibly high rates of maternal and infant deaths, and people think, "Oh, we have such an incredible medical system," yet we have high rates, high for the world.

[00:12:14] And these indigenous birth workers and midwives are stepping up and giving us ideas because we truly believe the way someone is born into this world

matters. And we also have death ways, ways of birthing someone out of this life into death. We're so scared of death in this world, and there are so many teachings that can assist us with that, and the list can go on and on.

[00:12:34] If there's anything that someone is interested in, I guarantee that in some indigenous culture, and probably more than one, there is a clue, a way that maybe we can take some of the things that we're missing in modernity and improve upon them.

[00:12:49] **Nate Hagens:** What about reciprocity? That's a core theme of the podcast, as we're gonna need more of that going forward.

[00:12:57] How is reciprocity central to kind of indigenous practices and communities? We need to learn and have a pathway forward. Could... Is there some seed there that could grow?

[00:13:14] **Victoria Sweet:** I'll speak about reciprocity, but I also wanna fine-tune it to reciprocity and giving, which is that growing up I was taught a lot about every time you give, something is going to come back to you.

[00:13:27] I remember at one point my grandfather was talking to me about giving, and it was embedded inside of me that when you're going to give someone a gift, you don't give any old thing, something that's not that big of a deal to you. If you're gonna give, you wanna give the best thing that you have.

[00:13:47] It should actually sting a little bit to give that thing away, because otherwise you don't instinctively inside of yourself understand the power of giving.

[00:13:57] **Nate Hagens:** And now our culture is the exact opposite of that.

[00:13:59] **Victoria Sweet:** Yeah. But there's... The thing is that if it stings a little bit and you are giving something that really, really matters to you, you're not going to forget that moment.

[00:14:09] And even if the person who receives it doesn't understand the depth of what it is that you gave, you do, and it changes you inside. It helps reduce your connection to things. You become less likely to hoard and want to hold onto something. You're less attached to objects because you are always willing to give it away.

[00:14:29] **Nate Hagens:** The only time I've ever felt what you just described is when I loved someone and did something or gave them something.

[00:14:37] **Victoria Sweet:** Yeah.

[00:14:37] **Nate Hagens:** And yeah.

[00:14:38] **Victoria Sweet:** Can you imagine how much we would love others if we did that with everyone we gave something to?

[00:14:44] **Nate Hagens:** And is this, like, a certain tribe or is this- No... ubiquitous in these cultures?

[00:14:50] **Victoria Sweet:** Even though we are not related, it is a theme I have found in every indigenous culture I've ever been in. It's hard because so many people wanna talk about this general indigenous culture as if there is one. There is not one. Right. But I do find similar ideas, similar values all the way across.

[00:15:07] **Nate Hagens:** I've been thinking a lot about this lately, and you watch some of my podcasts and my Franklys, and I'm really distinguishing between humans and humanity, which is large numbers of humans, especially with institutional structures and hierarchy and surplus.

[00:15:27] And the reason that a lot of indigenous communities around the world express these values, which I think are aligned with our crucible of where we came from, is 'cause they're smaller populations and numbers, and they're not in this entire capitalist, you know, I don't often say that, but this superorganism structure in the world.

[00:15:51] So I just wonder how much of these values and expressions of reciprocity and giving are a product of smaller numbers and actually less physical surplus.

[00:16:04] **Victoria Sweet:** Mm-hmm. I don't know that that's it.

[00:16:07] **Nate Hagens:** Hmm.

[00:16:07] **Victoria Sweet:** I think it has much more to do with the values and the society in which you're living. I had the opportunity to live in Poland from 1998 to 2000, and I can remember this woman, for some reason she took a liking to my little family, and she decided that she wanted to have us over for a meal.

[00:16:24] And we were expats. We were living, you know, with the surplus that you're given on an expat contract. We had a beautiful home. When we went into this woman's apartment, it was this tiny little hallway with a little water closet. Her living room was also her and her daughter's bedroom, a tiny kitchen.

[00:16:42] She served us this gorgeous eight-course meal. I don't even know how much of her salary it must have cost her to feed us that way, but it was such a heartfelt gift. She was living in Warsaw, Poland. It wasn't a small little community, but I believe that some of the things that have happened that have taken these values away in Western culture hadn't hit there yet.

[00:17:03] They were still in an older way of being and thinking and doing. That was the same level of reciprocity that we're speaking about.

[00:17:13] **Nate Hagens:** I hear and feel what you're saying because I've personally softened in the last five years, and I'm uber-focused on all the crisis risks and what I see ahead.

[00:17:26] And that focus has kept me away from these human stories and our potential, and I'm just seeing it in a lot more places, or at least seeing the possibility of it. So I have more hope than I used to, despite what's coming. Let me ask you this, and this is awkward coming from an old privileged white guy.

[00:17:54] But we talk about racism and some of the other demographic challenges in the world. Will there always be a remorse and anger of what happened in the genocide when white people came to North America and everything that happened? Or is it possible that indigenous people, local farmers, other people in Minnesota can work together in coming decades to make a better future?

[00:18:30] Or is the trauma and the hurt too deep? Like, just an honest question. I have no idea.

[00:18:39] **Victoria Sweet:** I think that repair is awfully hard to get to when there's so many people who don't want to face that it even happened.

[00:18:47] **Nate Hagens:** Uh-huh.

[00:18:47] **Victoria Sweet:** Or so many people who still wanna say, "Well, it wasn't me, so why are you upset?"

[00:18:52] To just honestly hear the story and understand the context of what happened can make all the difference. I can only speak for myself. I have no ability

to speak for the community at large. Everyone individually is going to be unique in their answer. But there are too many people who still wanna pretend it didn't happen, or who minimize it, or who come into our communities and say, "But you've been given all these other things.

[00:19:17] Why haven't you improved yourself?" Without truly understanding the context of the experience. My own grandfather was taken forcibly from our reservation, put into a boarding school, and made to feel ashamed of himself, and that has had a generational impact. It impacted my mother and the way that she raised me, and it impacted my life deeply.

[00:19:37] It's not ancient history. Until we can actually have an honest conversation, we don't expect everyone to come up and go overboard on it, but could we at least just admit that it happened, and that there's a reason for certain circumstances that we're still living in today? At the same time, there are a lot of indigenous groups in the US and other places who are saying, "Maybe we're never gonna get that, but we need to do things right now, and we are willing to make alliances with people and start working together."

[00:20:09] There's a lot of work happening with native and non-native peoples in the United States, and they're willing to overlook that in many cases. And I do think that sometimes it requires the alliance to happen first, and then the understanding comes. A lot of people want to identify our communities by trauma, and there is trauma, and it's a real part of our family and our story.

[00:20:33] But we're so much more than our trauma, and when people only wanna see us through the lens of trauma and the lens of poverty, they always miss the gifts that we have to give. So we somehow have to figure out a balance of yes, there's a context and we should name it and we should own it, and also this community is so much more.

[00:20:52] **Nate Hagens:** So flipping the relationship between funder and recipient, what will philanthropists, humans generally, opening their hearts to Ishkode and others who are working in this space, what are the... Flipping it, what are the gifts that we can receive from indigenous communities? What can we learn?

[00:21:19] What can we experience building on what you just said?

[00:21:25] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, first of all, I want to take that term of reciprocity, which we talked about earlier, and speak about it in the sort of philanthropic sense, which is a lot of times people look at philanthropy as charity, as we have and you do not have, and we're gonna come in and we're gonna help you.

[00:21:44] And if you come in in a reciprocity mindset, what you're going to say is, "We have something that you need right now that we need to flow to you to unlock the things that you have to offer, and in exchange, we are going to receive incredible things. You are going to bring to us this understanding of how to deal with the rivers, and what did you once know about how to bring things back into balance, and you're going to start assisting us in our own remembering path to what it once meant when our ancestors lived with the Earth in a particular way."

[00:22:19] We've mentioned already there are government forms, there are ways you care for your elders, there are ways of giving and exchanging that could be learned. I mean, I could give you stories and examples of things that are already happening. We have indigenous elders. We have an indigenous elder in Cordova, Alaska, who told me a few years ago, "The salmon are not going to be at the Copper River for maybe five to eight more years."

[00:22:44] And everyone around him said there's absolutely no way. This year, for the first time in his lifetime, three of the five species of salmon did not return to the Copper River. It's happening. And he knows that there's only so much that can

be done to restore that habitat. There's only so many trees that can be planted to try to bring the temperatures and the balance of the ecosystem around the rivers back into balance so that the salmon can come back again.

[00:23:10] So in the meantime, he is looking for other solutions. He's planting kelp. He's saying, "All right, we used to eat kelp all the time. We have to have something to bridge what we're losing with what we hope to repair one day, and there's a gap there. But we have some ideas, and if we look back and we think about those old ways that we once did things, I think we can come up with some solutions to help us as we're in this in-between time when some things are dying, and it's going to take a while for them to regenerate.

[00:23:40] What else can we do to help humanity survive this collapse?"

[00:23:45] **Nate Hagens:** I think we're kicking out the rungs of the ladder behind us as we, or below us as we climb. And I think a lot of people have this assumption that when there's disruption, we're just gonna go back 50 years or whatever. I just don't think there's going back.

[00:24:05] But I'm wondering if going forward there's a possibility for ecologists and indigenous leaders and communities and some form of technology all together to create some new way of regenerating living systems. And there's a lot of talk this week at Climate Week about regenerative agriculture and living systems and how humans need to be regenerators instead of extractors, those sorts of things. How can we possibly do that without listening and learning from indigenous communities?

[00:24:43] Like, what is the logic there? Do you agree?

[00:24:47] **Victoria Sweet:** I don't think there is a logic to say we can do it without the indigenous peoples. I think actually our communities excel in that. It's a

constant thing. We are right now people who have survived an entire societal breakdown ourselves, not created by us, but created by others who came in and wiped out culture and language and ways of living and family and community, and we said, "All right, so how do we restore ourselves in the modern context?"

[00:25:16] We are constantly having to figure out how to rebalance and to reclaim the things that have been lost, and I think we're in a perfect position to assist with doing that.

[00:25:26] **Nate Hagens:** So what are some of the differences between the way that Western organizations and structures do stewardship and indigenous communities?

[00:25:38] Have you noticed differences?

[00:25:41] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, if we go to the original environmental movements, for example, a lot of the tenets are, we need to conserve the environment from humans. So it's the idea that we have to keep humans out of it. We have to have these protected areas. Humans shouldn't do something, and that's the best thing for the Earth.

[00:26:02] But when you talk to indigenous peoples, that's completely different. Humans are a part of the environment. Without humans doing their job, stewarding the lands, stewarding the plants and the animals in a positive way, you're not going to have as thriving of a community. I have another example for you. I was in Hawaii, and I was on a taro farm, and they were restoring the lands, and they were trying to get rid of invasive plants, invasive grasses and trees and things that had overgrown into the area that were brought in by people from the outside.

[00:26:35] And one day, as they'd been doing all this work on their land, this bird showed up on the property, and they recognized it, and it's a very sacred bird to the native Hawaiians. It's also highly endangered. Now, when you see one of these birds, you're supposed to report it to the government agencies and say, "This endangered bird."

[00:26:52] So they came out, and they said, "Oh yeah, you have a couple of these birds on your property. Well, you have to stop all work now. You can't do any work because you could disrupt the birds." But what they forgot was that these birds lay their eggs in nests on the ground. The invasive grasses that they were pulling out were the very reason that these birds were so endangered because they were going in and choking out the nests.

[00:27:15] So if they stopped pulling the invasive grasses, the birds wouldn't be able to thrive on this property. So finally, and you know, we don't want to get anyone in trouble, but they finally had to just say, "You know, we don't wanna know what's going on, but we want these birds to thrive." And the last time I spoke with them, of the 400 of these birds still in existence, 40 of them were spotted on this area of land.

[00:27:38] It was well-intentioned to say if you find this endangered animal, this bird, you should stop your work, but yet the stewardship of the human pulling these invasive things out of the earth so that the earth could thrive as it was intended in that particular ecosystem was the exact answer that was needed to bring this bird back from endangered status.

[00:28:00] **Nate Hagens:** What's the challenge here with your work? I believe you fund 200 different communities or NGOs that are all indigenous, and there's thousands more that need funding, so you have to raise large dollars to be able to support these people. What is the challenge for you trying to grow this fund and this movement towards getting more money flowing towards indigenous

communities and the things that we get in return for that as seeds for different cultural responses?

[00:28:39] **Victoria Sweet:** I think there are numerous. I find it fascinating in the philanthropic world that people are so risk-averse. When you talk to people in venture capital, they are willing to put millions of dollars on big risks that may or may not ever pay off, and in the investment world, that makes sense to them.

[00:29:01] Yet that risk tolerance doesn't translate into philanthropic giving. Why are we not more open to saying we're going to take a chance? You put these little nonprofits through greater due diligence and proofs than they put these massive investment opportunities, and I think that's really interesting.

[00:29:19] And I'm not saying there has never been a project that didn't succeed. Of course there has. But I find it so interesting that if there is an indigenous project that fails, it's used as, "Oh, see, this is why we don't fund indigenous peoples." It happens all the time in non-indigenous 501(c)(3)s, and nobody says, "Well, we should just not fund any 501(c)(3)s."

[00:29:39] We're held to a different standard, and I think that's interesting. I think we as a community should pause and ask ourselves why. Why do we put a higher level of requirement on indigenous peoples?

[00:29:50] **Nate Hagens:** I'm not an expert at all in this, but it seems pretty obvious to me that there are peoples in our country, in our continent, that have already lived through a version of The Great Simplification, and why shouldn't we be looking to them and listening for some answers and some direction and some just ways of discourse?

[00:30:16] What about governance and things like that? What can we learn along those lines?

[00:30:22] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, one of the things that I learned early on, in our community at least, is that the greatest leader is not the person who is standing on the top looking down and barking down orders. The leader at their heart, the *Ogichidaa*, is the one who goes underneath the community and lifts them up on their shoulders, that helps them rise.

[00:30:43] And I think just that sense of what it is to be a leader from that perspective can shift so much. People talk about servant leadership. I think it is that, but maybe slightly tweaked. That's one piece.

[00:30:56] **Nate Hagens:** That's not just one tribe. You've seen that– Yeah... like across the board?

[00:31:00] **Victoria Sweet:** Absolutely. That concept that the leader has a responsibility to the community, not just this ability or this authority to bark things out and say, "Well, I have this idea and let's take it from here."

[00:31:12] I think that's very powerful, especially at a time where we need to be inspiring the creativity of everyone. I believe that anyone on Earth right now was born for this time and has something innate within them that can help us all survive the things that are coming. That's why we are here, and a great leader is going to inspire that to come out, is going to inspire people to tap deep inside and say, "What is that thing that I have to offer the world at this unique moment that we're in?"

[00:31:41] I also have noticed justice systems. I'm an attorney. I have seen state court judges come to Indigenous peacemakers and say, "Help me understand this because our justice system isn't working the way that we were hoping it could work." There are so many pieces of governance. The Haudenosaunee are starting to write books saying, "We had something to do with this United States Constitution.

[00:32:04] There were things learned from us, but you didn't take it all, and there are pieces missing, and not having those pieces has impacted its effectiveness. We're standing here ready to share the rest if you're open to hearing it."

[00:32:17] **Nate Hagens:** Can you share one of those pieces that's missing, something along the lines?

[00:32:21] **Victoria Sweet:** Well, one of the things that they were missing was the leadership of women. Whenever, and this is another thing I've noticed everywhere I've ever gone, when there has been a series of colonizers moving into places, one of the very first things they did is they removed women from leadership. And when I say that, there's people who will have a visceral reaction.

[00:32:39] "Are you saying women are better than men?" No. I'm saying that women have a very unique role in leadership, as do men, and you need the combination of the strengths of each in order to move forward in a very collective way. But when they came in, they knocked down the women who had a particular role in their communities and said, "Only the men can speak," and they threw everything out of balance.

[00:33:00] But that's just one piece. There's a lot more to it.

[00:33:03] **Nate Hagens:** So, just to be clear, the US Constitution was based on input from Haudenosa-

[00:33:13] **Victoria Sweet:** Haudenosaunee...

[00:33:13] **Nate Hagens:** Haudenosaunee people, but we picked and chose the things that we included- Yes... and we left out some- Yes... some doozies.

[00:33:21] **Victoria Sweet:** And there's a lot more, and I'm not Haudenosaunee and I don't feel qualified to speak to it.

[00:33:25] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:33:25] **Victoria Sweet:** But there's a book that was just published where different Haudenosaunee elders came in and brought in different pieces and said, "You didn't bring in this. You didn't bring in this." And when you have a beautiful system and you take out some key pieces, it's not ever going to be as effective as it could have been.

[00:33:43] I think we've done some amazing things in the United States. I'm not trying to negate everything that has ever happened. But we are now watching this collapse of our governmental systems. Maybe it's time to reflect, step back, and see if there are some key pieces that we could learn to incorporate moving forward.

[00:34:00] **Nate Hagens:** What are your hopes and dreams? Well, I guess that's a huge question, but with respect to this work, if you and people like you are successful and the philanthropic dollars move towards indigenous communities, and just assuming that my broad architecture of what's coming politically, financially, economically, ecologically unfolds in coming decades, what do you hope to really accomplish?

[00:34:33] **Victoria Sweet:** I hope to unlock the genius that the communities and the individuals, specifically the indigenous communities and individuals, have to offer to assist all of us to get through these times. My tribe has a prophecy, and it says that there is going to be a time where humanity will come to a choice point, and we're either going to choose this way that's connected to the Earth, and humanity will survive the things that are happening, or we're gonna choose a different path and we will not.

[00:35:04] There are many different indigenous groups that have similar prophecies, and in our community, we believe that time is right now, and we

stand ready to start bringing back many of these things that we've held and that have just been sitting there untapped and unrecognized and not respected, to the people so that we all come through it together.

[00:35:27] It's about all of the people with the same hearts finding each other and figuring out how to walk through the troubled times that are coming. We're not pretending troubled times aren't coming. We knew they were going to come. But we do believe there is a solution, and we honestly believe we have an important role to play in it.

[00:35:43] **Nate Hagens:** The Eagle and the Condor, yes?

[00:35:45] **Victoria Sweet:** The Eagle and the Condor is another one that says very much the same thing.

[00:35:48] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Do you speak Ojibwe?

[00:35:51] **Victoria Sweet:** Very poorly.

[00:35:52] **Nate Hagens:** Very poorly?

[00:35:53] **Victoria Sweet:** My grandfather, as I mentioned, went to a boarding school, and they were taught not to speak it. So I have gone and have started, and my elders are constantly asking me, "When are you going to do it?"

[00:36:04] But the little bit that I have done and learned has changed the way I view the world. One of the words for coffee is *makade-mashkikiwaaboo*, which is very- That's a lot for coffee. Yeah, there's a lot. But the reason why is that our language was never meant to be a noun-based language. It's a verb-based language.

[00:36:22] So when we speak about the thing, which is a cup of coffee, we talk about the black bean and the hot water and the medicine water. It's about the way something is, its purpose in life.

[00:36:34] **Nate Hagens:** It's the experience almost.

[00:36:35] **Victoria Sweet:** It is. And so when I started learning my language, and I started understanding that, and I started looking at people and beings, suddenly I was thinking about their purpose and how they were showing up and what it was that they were doing.

[00:36:49] I started thinking about how incredible our world could be if we were all wired constantly to think that way. And instead of saying, "That is a man doing the thing," we're saying the doing and the being is so important that this man is doing. And it just changes the focus.

[00:37:05] **Nate Hagens:** I've talked about this once or twice before, but how much of our behavior of the economic superorganism is because English is the lingua franca and it's a noun-based-

[00:37:17] **Victoria Sweet:** Yeah...

[00:37:17] **Nate Hagens:** language? Like, could we do and live the way we are now if it were a verb or experience-based language, I think is an interesting question.

[00:37:27] **Victoria Sweet:** I think it's an interesting question, too, and I actually believe it's possible. It's not just English. Most of our modern languages are noun-based languages. And when you start to rewire your brain to learn a language, it rewires everything about your perceptions and how you see beings in relationship with other beings.

[00:37:46] And I think that's part of the worldview that we're talking about, some of the pieces that we feel like we're missing. Their very brains were wired differently because of the way they communicated and experienced and saw things in relationship to each other.

[00:38:01] **Nate Hagens:** That's really cool. I hadn't really thought about it that way.

[00:38:04] Yeah.

[00:38:06] **Victoria Sweet:** And another reason why I'm passionate about keeping indigenous languages alive.

[00:38:11] **Nate Hagens:** Right, because some of them, there's like 20 people or less- Right... that speak it, and they're trying to pass it down, and who are they passing it down to? So how many tribes are there in the United States or in North America?

[00:38:24] **Victoria Sweet:** There are 575 federally recognized-

[00:38:28] **Nate Hagens:** Okay...

[00:38:28] **Victoria Sweet:** tribes, and then there are others that have state recognition. The recognition question is touchy, and I don't wanna get into it too deeply, but there's a lot of us. And we are not necessarily all related. It's so complicated to speak about tribes because as a political unit, we're sort of lumped together and as the ones who existed here first, but we are all pretty radically different.

[00:38:50] **Nate Hagens:** And the population then is approximately?

[00:38:54] **Victoria Sweet:** Three to 6% of the US.

[00:38:56] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[00:38:57] **Victoria Sweet:** Depending.

[00:38:57] **Nate Hagens:** Three to 6%. So that's like 15 million or-

[00:39:00] **Victoria Sweet:** I think we're more like six, 7%. Yeah.

[00:39:03] **Nate Hagens:** So I was sitting next to you at the Planetary Health Check, an environmental thing a couple days ago, and there was an appeal to support indigenous populations around the world.

[00:39:18] And you had a reaction to that and pointed out to me that I hadn't thought about it. Like, what about the indigenous people in our own country? What about the philanthropy there? Do you wanna speak to that briefly?

[00:39:33] **Victoria Sweet:** Sure. First of all, I agree with the appeal. We should be funding indigenous peoples all over the world and getting them the monies into all of these communities.

[00:39:42] But it's an interesting conversation when I go into US philanthropic spaces and I start speaking about the tribes in the US and they start talking about, "Well, we need to fund in the Global South, and we need to fund in here and here and there." And I say things about, what about the communities in your own backyard?

[00:39:59] And many of them have this image that because the tribes are here in the US, they have access to plenty of funds, and they should be looking in other places. And while I agree there are many places that need, and I would like to see more money flowing in those areas, I don't want the tribes in the US to be forgotten, as they're often overlooked.

[00:40:17] People are so interested in other parts of the world that they miss the very thing that's happening next door to them. And I don't know if some of it's related to prejudice, why people say, "Well, they have casinos, and they have these treaty rights, and they have certain tax benefits and other things." But if you really think that any of that surmounts the challenges that the communities are facing in the US, you haven't really sat down and gotten to know the local communities, and I would like to challenge people to do that.

[00:40:46] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, not to go down another rabbit hole, but maybe the existence of casinos becomes some sort of a psychological barrier to philanthropy, 'cause we have these communities that A, are in need. B, have knowledge that can help our situation. C, potentially have the creativity and hope and resolve to collaborate with to chart a path to a better future.

[00:41:16] But there's these casinos, so we don't need to support. Is that somewhat true?

[00:41:23] **Victoria Sweet:** Yeah, I completely agree that there are people who think that way, and I wanna say right now, they're missing a big part of the picture. There were periods of time in our history where we were prevented from feeding ourselves.

[00:41:35] The government so much wanted to keep us in a dependency model with the commodities that it was providing, 'cause you provide the food, you can control the community in a particular way, that they made it extremely difficult. In some places, they put our communities on reservations on the worst land imaginable, and then they say, "Oh, well, you have a few commodities and a few little bits of support, so that should be enough for you."

[00:41:58] So the tribes got creative. They said, "What can we possibly do? How can we build up an economic system in a system that is designed against us?"

And someone came up with the idea, "You know what? We could do casinos." You didn't give us a lot of other choices. There weren't a lot of other ways to build up an economy.

[00:42:15] Everyone says, "Well, build an economy," and then take away all the tools. So casinos became an option. Casinos became something that we're like, "Well, that's at least something that we can all agree that we can do." But not every casino is making millions of dollars. Some casinos barely provide anything.

[00:42:32] The casino on my tribe's property is able to provide some food for elders, help provide some early childhood education, help work on some of the roads, can help provide jobs for tribal members who maybe have gone to jail and now they wanna come back and they wanna figure out how to build up a work history and no one wants to take a chance on them.

[00:42:52] So they're doing things internally, but we're not a big per cap tribe. We're not making millions of dollars, and most of the casinos are not those. Those are the exceptions, and those communities are now figuring out how to take and build on the benefits that come from their casinos. The majority of tribes are not incredibly wealthy because of their casinos.

[00:43:12] This is simply one tool that was at our disposal.

[00:43:15] **Nate Hagens:** I think you probably agree that we're headed for tough times, so I think philanthropy and government, but philanthropy has higher degrees of freedom and is faster, is gonna be under huge demand. There are gonna be so many people and communities in dire need as the months and years go by.

[00:43:43] I mean, we're already seeing it now, and I don't think the real price spikes from the Hormuz situation have hit North America as much as they have in

Asia. How are we gonna deal with that? Like, how is this gonna change philanthropy, in your view? And yeah, and again, how can your little piece of that make an impact?

[00:44:15] Big question.

[00:44:15] **Victoria Sweet:** Very big question, very real. I think we're past the time of sitting around talking about it. We're past the time where we should just keep our money sitting in these different vehicles waiting for the proper moment to release it, the perfect project. I don't think we have time for that.

[00:44:35] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:44:35] **Victoria Sweet:** I think the time is right now, and right now money is the energetic means of opening up a community's ability to create and to come up with the plan. I think we need to start having a conversation right now. Well, not just have a conversation, act right now. Start saying, "Let's get this money into the communities who can come up with plans and work with us to try to fill in our understanding to figure out how we're going to get through these tough times that are coming."

[00:45:03] And I think that that's been one of the frustrations right now in the world of philanthropy. There's been a slight movement here, a slight movement there. Then all of a sudden someone's scared again, and maybe we're not going to do it. And I'm happy to serve as a conduit, as a support, as someone who says...

[00:45:22] There are a lot of groups that say, "Well, I don't give philanthropically to indigenous communities because I just don't understand them, and I don't really know how to go about doing it." And I appreciate that because unintentional

harm can come when someone flows something in wrong ways or in the wrong vehicle.

[00:45:38] And so I think sometimes people don't act because of fear. But there are a number of us now who've been working in these fields who have had experience, who understand both Western systems and indigenous communities, who can serve as a support, who can say, "All right. If you are mostly interested in midwifery, I know all these programs out here, and you can flow your money right now to set things up to be prepared to flow through the things that are happening.

[00:46:02] You're interested in regenerative ag? Let me introduce you over here." Whether it's through our fund or just through our networks of brilliant individuals and incredible community orgs, we can start moving things at an exponentially faster rate to deal with the challenges that are coming.

[00:46:18] **Nate Hagens:** I hope you're gonna succeed, and I think you will.

[00:46:20] **Victoria Sweet:** Thank you.

[00:46:21] **Nate Hagens:** I hope so. It's important. It makes total sense to me. So I have a PhD, and I have a lot of intellectual colleagues over the years, and I think I know a lot about the system science of the more than human predicament. And yet there's a lot that I don't know, and increasingly as I get older, I'm more humble that...

[00:46:46] and have a realization that there are other ways of knowing. And I've heard you on other interviews talk about indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing. Can you speak to the contrast between that and maybe a Western analytical worldview?

[00:47:05] **Victoria Sweet:** A lot of elders do speak to these ways of knowing and understanding things that come from our stories, which are often not places that someone from a Western mindset would look to for wisdom and guidance on things.

[00:47:18] I've spoken already about the wisdom that comes through our languages and how we name something and what that story tells us about how that thing can work in its best way. But I think what I'm seeing right now that is so beautiful, I'm watching Indigenous elders sitting at tables with Western scientists, and the Western scientists are genuinely trying to understand the pieces that the Indigenous elders are bringing.

[00:47:44] They're coming from a new perspective. They're coming from another way of seeing the earth and the land and the challenges that are being faced. And then the Western scientists in return are coming in and saying, "And here's what we've discovered through our systems and through our studies." And these two ideas are actually not in competition.

[00:48:03] They're just two approaches to the same problem coming from two different places in space. And when they come together in a particular way, you fill in the gaps for each other. I think that's the beauty of what we can do together. Take the PhDs and all of these scientists who can bring in the data studies and bring in what they're gathering and seeing on satellite imagery, and then have this elder come in and say, "There was a time when something like this happened before, and we did this and this to go through it," and then figure out how we fill in the missing pieces together.

[00:48:39] **Nate Hagens:** So again, I'm a scientist and I've long pooh-poohed things like dowsing sticks and tarot cards and such because I don't... What I realized recently, though, is it's not literally these tarot cards you flip over and there's like literally an answer there.

[00:48:56] But what it does is it allows you to tell a story that comes from your body that doesn't come in words, and that story like creates a knowledge or a feeling that gels with the actual science, and I think that's kind of what you're suggesting, that the story is a different way of bringing knowledge into your body and mind.

[00:49:21] I don't know.

[00:49:21] **Victoria Sweet:** There's the story, and also, you know, I don't think I'm a stupid person. I'm educated and I've learned things, and I value my brain and its ability to process. But as I've gotten older, you know, I'm a grandmother now, I've moved into a very different place in my life. I have come to recognize that I have a lot of wisdom that I feel like starts here.

[00:49:42] It starts in a knowing first, and when that leads and then I process through my brain, I get a deeper and greater picture. I think in the West, we spend so much time in our heads. We're constantly spinning and then what about this, and we're parsing it down, and we've learned to turn off that knowing that's inside of us.

[00:50:02] Every human has it. It is not a unique gift to just one person out there. And growing up and going into community and sitting with the elders, they were constantly trying to get me to listen here, and I always wanted to figure it out here. I used to say I survived all the things I survived because I was smart and I knew how to think around it and through it.

[00:50:22] But actually, if I look back, my success usually came when first I understood something in here, then I processed it through my brain and found a way to describe it, and I think we need to do more of that.

[00:50:35] **Nate Hagens:** I think so too. So I think it was Daniel Schmachtenberger, but I'm not sure, who had like an overview of indigenous cultures and found that the word wisdom often was overlapping with the concept of restraint.

[00:50:55] Do you have any thoughts on that?

[00:50:57] **Victoria Sweet:** I agree. I mean, it can be something as simple as if you are out harvesting, you never overharvest, you never take it all. You don't grab every berry. You leave something behind for the birds, for the plants to replenish themselves, and I think that is an overarching understanding in everything about the way we are supposed to live.

[00:51:19] If we are constantly, and I think this is a really good juxtaposition between Western ideas of we're going to extract as much as possible from an area until there is nothing left, and then we move on to the next area. If you have a restraint in the way you act in the world, you don't take every single bit of it.

[00:51:37] You take enough. You take what you need, what your community needs, and you leave something more for someone else or something else. And I think if we can take that principle and apply it in more places, I agree. To me, that is the ultimate definition of wisdom.

[00:51:53] **Nate Hagens:** So I've only got to half of my questions, but I wanna be respectful of your time because I know you have another event.

[00:52:00] So let me ask you some of the questions I close with all my interviews. What advice do you have to someone listening to this, being aware of the meta-crisis and all the things coming our way? Like what personal advice might you offer?

[00:52:18] **Victoria Sweet:** I know that times are really scary, but please do what you can to not live only in the fear.

[00:52:25] Because when we are only in that energy of fear, we don't make our wisest choices. We find ourselves rushing about, scared, "I have to do this, and I have to do that." Pause. Breathe. Train yourself to start hearing something from in here to see what comes next. And also, consider the indigenous communities in our world, not as a neat hobby and not as a charity case, but as living beings who live near you and around you, and who also want to see us come through on the other side of this.

[00:52:59] And maybe challenge yourself to learn something about some community that speaks to you, and see if there is a spark or a way that you can connect yourself with them.

[00:53:09] **Nate Hagens:** I love that advice, but here's a typical knucklehead Nate question. Like, if I were to show up at a local Minnesota tribe and wanna have a conversation like that because I'm curious and I wanna build bridges, would that work?

[00:53:29] **Victoria Sweet:** Hmm. Okay, it depends. There might be other ways to start.

[00:53:35] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:53:36] **Victoria Sweet:** But to find an individual who can help guide you to that, and maybe it starts with reading a book or finding a documentary, going online. There are so many resources. And also, our communities obviously really do want to build bridges.

[00:53:51] We are constantly asking, "Will you please listen? Will you please hear our story? Will you please acknowledge what happened?" We're actually pretty open to wanting to talk to people who come in genuinely curious.

[00:54:03] **Nate Hagens:** Well, I'm pretty open to acknowledging what happened. Amazing. So that's a start.

[00:54:07] **Victoria Sweet:** I think that's a beautiful start.

[00:54:09] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So what advice do you have for young humans in their teens and early 20s who learn about our more than human predicament?

[00:54:19] **Victoria Sweet:** I'm gonna go back to something I said before, which is you were born for this time. There is something inside of you that is important to help all of us survive the thing that is coming.

[00:54:33] So while you are learning the realities of the world that you were born into, and while you are experiencing it, don't undersell yourself. Pause. Start to discover what drives you, what lights that spark inside of you, and follow it, and I think you're going to find the genius of the thing that you were born in this earth to do.

[00:54:53] And really focus yourself on that even more. You have to educate yourself, but please focus yourself on that thing that you have to contribute, because we need you.

[00:55:04] **Nate Hagens:** A couple more trivial questions. What do you care most about in the world?

[00:55:09] **Victoria Sweet:** That's such a hard question because obviously there's my children, and my grandchildren, and my dog, the ones that have the biggest part of my heart.

[00:55:20] But I see all of humanity as one very beautifully interconnected whole. So I don't know that I can pick one thing, because this Earth and every being on it is that thing. So I care deeply about us finding a way to survive the things that are coming together.

[00:55:37] **Nate Hagens:** And if you had a magic wand and could make one wish, without personal recourse to help humanity and the biosphere, what would that be?

[00:55:47] **Victoria Sweet:** I have so many. I would wish for every single human to find their thing, and I would wish for all of us to interconnect our knowings and remove these harmful things that are destroying our life, destroying our communities, and bring us in a united front together to survive. I wish for us to survive.

[00:56:16] **Nate Hagens:** Victoria Sweet, thank you for your work. Thank you for your time today. Do you have any closing words for our listeners?

[00:56:26] **Victoria Sweet:** Don't be afraid to get to know indigenous communities, and please come to us in a spirit of respect and reciprocity, and know that that's going to be returned to you. And understand that this isn't a misunderstanding of history.

[00:56:41] This isn't an over-romanticization of who we are as peoples. We have something to offer, and we really do want to join with our neighbors, with our allies, with our friends, to find some answers. If you have the ability to support by flowing money and resources to the communities, know that you're going to unlock something incredible that is going to help all of us.

[00:57:05] And if you have questions on how that could look, please reach out.

[00:57:09] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you, my friend.

[00:57:09] **Victoria Sweet:** Thank you, Nate.

[00:57:09] **Nate Hagens:** I hope you succeed in all your efforts. To be continued.

[00:57:16] **Victoria Sweet:** Thanks.

[00:57:17] **Nate Hagens:** If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit thegreatsimplification.com for references and show notes. From there, you can also join our Hylo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter.

[00:57:30] This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzy Sirianni. Our production team also includes Leslie Batt-Lutz, Brady Heyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriella Sleiman, and Grace Brunfelt. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode.